

UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

The Uncharted Isle

“Could you please look at the *Awashonks* log, and tell me if, on March 8, 1835, the crew discovered an unknown island?”

We received this unusual request last year via email. It took only moments to retrieve the battered logbook from the vault and to find the entry in question. It took a little longer — a couple of hours — to decipher its ancient handwriting, but finally we pieced together a transcription.

Sunday March 8th [1835]

Commence with moderate trades from NE with squalls of rain. Heading up SSW at 2 p.m. Finished the jibb and put it below. Middle part moderate and pleasant lying up N by W. Latter part strong trades from ESE. At day light saw an island bearin[g] WNW dst [distance] 10 mil[es]. At 6 am kept off for it. At 7 am sent 2 boats ashore. Found no inhabitants nor no landing with the boats. 4 men swam ashore[;] found aplenty of [??] and one tun and Beech La Mar. It [is] a small low Isle not la[i]d down in any book or chart on board. Its in Latt 11.38 South and Long 165.06W. At 11 am returned on board and hauled on the wind to the Northward heading up N by E.

[In margin:] Latt by [BS? or CBS?] 11.34 South

[In margin:] Long by Chro 165.067 west



*Silas Jones was the 3rd mate of the *Awashonks* in 1835. Discovering an uncharted isle would be the least of his surprises on that voyage.*

We emailed this transcription back to the inquirer, who was based in Western Europe, and asked him how he had known what our logbook would say. Since most of our ship’s logs and account books (47 in all) have never been transcribed or published, they can only be read by someone who visits the Museums — or the Falmouth Public Library, which has a microfilm version. The researcher explained that, in the course of making a database on Pacific islands, he had been reading a book by Edouard Stackpole, a Nantucket man who wrote popular maritime histories in the mid 20th century. Stackpole referred to the fact and date of the *Awashonks*’ discovery. Our patron, how-

ever, wisely wanted to confirm this claim from the primary source. An online search informed him who owned the log, and he emailed us through our website.

Our European researcher allowed for the slight inaccuracy to be expected in nineteenth century coordinates. Then he concluded that the *Awashonks* had visited Nassau Island, in the Cook group. Nassau had actually been “discovered” a few times before, by other sailors, but it still didn’t appear on many charts used in that era. The island is a coral reef formation nine meters above sea level. It was populated as of 2006, but only by 71 hardy souls. You can learn more about it [here](#), and [here](#).

We were intrigued by the items found on the island. A “tun” is a cask for wine or beer. It had probably washed ashore. “Beech La Mar” is a corruption of *beche-de-mer*, another term for “sea cucumber.” This elongated echinoderm is found in the oceans worldwide, but mainly in the Asian Pacific waters. It’s savored as a delicacy in China and Japan. (For more information on New Englanders and the sea cucumber trade, click [here](#).)

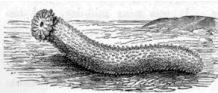
All our logbooks recently were digitized through a grant secured by the Falmouth Public Library. Though the images are still available only on discs at the Museums or library, the digitization is an important step towards eventually posting the logs online. Our European friend proves that there is an audience for viewing them remotely. Even when their entries are clipped and monotonous, the logbooks can teach us a lot about climate and trade patterns. The longer entries often contain seeds of interesting stories: a whale sighting, a kill, or a gam with another ship.

One incident in the *Awashonks* log overshadows all the others. A few months after

discovering the uncharted isle, the men were blindsided by an ambush set by the natives on Baring’s Island. It was probably the most famous episode in Falmouth maritime history. The captain and his first and second mates lay dead. The third mate, 21-year-old Silas Jones, was now in command. As the enemy overran the ship, he crawled between decks towards the cabin where the muskets were stored.

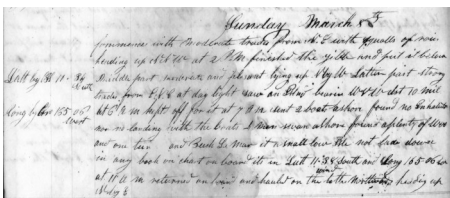
But Silas’s story is an oft-told tale that doesn’t belong in this space. If you want to find out what happened to him, you’ll have to pay a virtual visit to the [archives page](#).

Meg Costello
& Terry White



Sea cucumbers.

Above: *Holothuria tubulosa*. Top right: Photo by NOAA. Bottom right: Photo by Barry Brown, substation Curacao. Both photos downloaded from [ocean.si.edu](#).



Awashonks log entry for March 8, 1835.